

Critics' **THEATRE REVIEWS**

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*Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play during the week of March 31, 1941.

† "My Fair Ladies" opened Sunday, March 23rd, at the Hudson Theatre.

† "Native Son" opened Monday, March 24th, at the St. James Theatre.

† "Gabrielle" opened Tuesday, March 25th, at the Maxine Elliott Theatre.

THEATRE REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

Critics' Theatre Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they
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"Gabrielle"

Reprinted from NEW YORK POST, March 26, 1941

Eleanor Lynn Seen in "Gabrielle"

By JOHN MASON BROWN

USING Thomas Mann's "Tristan" (a short story written in 1902) as a basis, Leonardo Bercovici has fashioned a play called "Gabrielle" which was acted earnestly at the Maxine Elliott last evening. Although as an adaptor Mr. Bercovici has equalled his players in their seriousness, and extended and illustrated the original with intelligence, he can be said to have made no more than the best of a bad situation.

His drama, like Mr. Mann's short story, is promising in its beginnings, when atmosphere is its goal and it is establishing the case histories and characters of the invalids assembled in the cheerless, gossiping sanatorium known as Einfrid. But, just as Mr. Mann's "Tristan" seems in the reading like only a feeble preliminary sketch for what was to take full form in "The Magic Mountain," so does "Gabrielle" come across the footlights as the grayest outline of a play which refuses to be written.

Mr. Bercovici is unable to avoid the faults of the fable he is dramatizing. If Mr. Mann's

story, which contrasts a prosperous and insensitive bourgeois husband with a second-rate artist, is a disappointing one; if its symbolism is both intricate and elusive; and if it dwindles into silliness when once its plot gets under way, it must be regretfully confessed that Mr. Bercovici's play suffers from the same shortcomings.

Ink-Stained and Dull

Mr. Bercovici does not limit himself to the single short story by Mr. Mann. Quite properly he feels free to weave into that one narrative themes Mr. Mann has used elsewhere. But, though "Tristan" gains in amplitude when so altered, it does not gain in clarity, interest, or persuasion. In spite of the fact that Mr. Mann's fine mind often makes itself felt, the play in which it now seeks to have its say is an ink-stained affair. Unwilling to leave the library, it dies dramatically before its fragile heroine's trachea can turn into tuberculosis, and she can be carried off by a disease which the novelist, who has fallen in love with her, willfully aggravates, preferring to see her dead rather than to have her returned in health to her dull husband.

After an interesting first act "Gabrielle" soon sinks into a decline which proves fatal. Even the radiance and fragile charm of Eleanor Lynn's excellent performance as Frau Kinterjahn cannot save this invalid "Candida" from the tedium and obscurity which combine to destroy it. Although Byron McGrath, Frieda Altman, Whitner Russell, Martin Wolfson, John Cromwell, Harold Vermilyea, and Frederic Tozere contribute conscientious, often skilful characterizations, and Randolph Carter's direction is sensitive, "Gabrielle" is ailing enough as drama to take its place among the sick in the sanatorium which is its scene.

Reprinted from NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, March 26, 1941

Gabrielle Incoherent as Its Characters

By SIDNEY B. WHIPPLE

LEONARDO BERCOVICI seems to have gone into such a deep study of the mysticism in Thomas Mann's early work, Tristan, that he found it impossible to emerge long enough to write a coherent play about it. Mr. Bercovici's drama, called Gabrielle after the principal character in the Mann story, is dull, pointless, poorly cast and totally without life.

Not having read Tristan, I have not the slightest notion, from anything to be found in Gabrielle, what the famous author was striving to show. His characters appear to have been an assortment of neurotics gathered in a Swiss sanatorium for the sole purpose of spending their last

days insulting one another. The men are, for the most part, cynics at best and sadists at worst. The women are, without exception, sexually repressed and hence ripe for the sinister designs of the males.

Into this sanatorium are introduced an ethereal woman, the wife of an earth-bound

businessman, and a second-rate poet who fancies himself a Svengali. The amateur Svengali hypnotizes the unfortunate lady into playing the piano for him (an exercise forbidden by her doctor) and thus drives her into galloping consumption and death.

If there is any point to this, I imagine it must be that the author was trying to say

that beautiful death is preferable to life with an unfeeling boor, a position that would be indefensible even if argued in far more powerful language than Mr. Bercovici or Mr. Mann wrote into this particular story.

Among the surrounding characters are a physician, head of the depressing institution, who delights in telling his more nervous patients what will happen to their corporeal beings after three months in a casket; a character presumably representing the Old Man with a Scythe, who plays cards constantly and who always wins from the other patients; a general in the best Prussian tradition; two quarrelsome gentlemen who are interested too deeply in each other's libido; and a housekeeper who apparently is the only normal person in the establishment, although she may have been in love with the doctor, which would in itself be an indication of some obscure mental malady.

Despite these curious figures and their even more curious activities, the play drags interminably, and the inherent dullness of the script seems not to have been helped by apathetic direction.

Players like Byron McGrath, Frederic Tozere and Harold Vermilyea are capable, but not capable enough to bring life to such confused characters, while John Cromwell, in the role of the sadistic poet, was an unhappy choice. Eleanor Lynn played the part of the Swiss Camille with sweet resignation, while Grace Coppin—always a graceful and appealing actress—was wasted in the role of the weak-minded housekeeper.

Reprinted from NEW YORK SUN, March 26, 1941

'Gabrielle,' Static Drama, Is Presented at Maxine Elliott's Theater

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

NOT even the distinguished short stories of Thomas Mann are proof against erosion. Translated ineptly for the stage and produced with a minimum of insight, they may amount to no more than such static interludes as "Gabrielle," which was dimly played last evening at Maxine Elliott's Theater. "Gabrielle" is derived from Mr. Mann's "Tristan," Leonardo Bercovici acting as adapter.

In its original form, "Tristan," with which I am unfamiliar, no doubt was one of those subtle, searching stories of character which Mr. Mann so often writes. On the stage it is dreadfully less than this. On the stage neurotic patients of an Alpine sanatorium sit in the vast cavern of a grayish room and talk distantly in turn. They talk spitefully and turn over one another's little souls. And after a time pretty Gabrielle is brought for treatment by her

common, fussy, honest little husband.

She falls into the clutches of a pretentious, second-rate novelist and the results for her are disastrous. He deludes her with indifferently poetical outbursts and persuades her to play the piano as a symbol of her release from "commonness." This, pretty obscurely on any realistic basis, leads to relapse and death. On Mr. Mann's pages this story may well have had a kind of mystic intensity.

But on the stage, in Mr. Bercovici's pedestrian version, it is idle drama. Dullness sets in early and by the end of the second act is overpowering. It does not matter, by that time, that the last act is an improvement; that then, briefly, one or two of the characters come to life. Long before then, "Gabrielle" has joined the company of lost causes.

Peggy Clark's large, gloomy set does much to enhance the play's defects, and Randolph Carter's lifeless direction would anesthetize the actors do what can be done. Frederic Tozere is sardonic as the physician, Byron McGrath suitably scathing as a cynical patient. Miss Eleanor Lynn is prettily wistful in the title role and John Cromwell appropriately odd as the novelist. All the actors have willing hands, but "Gabrielle" dies on them, just the same.

"Gabrielle"

Reprinted from NEW YORK TIMES, March 26, 1941

Leonardo Bercovici's 'Gabrielle' Is Based on on Thomas Mann's Short Story, 'Tristan'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

ON a mountain top in the Swiss Alps, some invalids take a strange and fascinating view of life in Leonardo Bercovici's "Gabrielle," which was put on at Maxine Elliott's last evening. The drama is based on Thomas Mann's short story "Tristan," which, in turn, is said to be the source of "The Magic Mountain." As a stage work, "Gabrielle" seems muscle-bound, and it is rigidly acted by John Cromwell in one of the essential parts. Whatever Mr. Bercovici has to say comes with difficulty to the surface of the play. But that does not prevent "Gabrielle" from looking into the corners of the mind with startling flashes of insight. Cold, tight-lipped, disinterested, almost immovable, it touches some sensitive places in the truth of human life.

As invalids, suffering from an assortment of maladies, the characters of "Gabrielle" are living apart from the world in a mountain-top sanitarium. They get on each other's nerves. They watch each other closely without sympathy. They are too far gone to tolerate illusions in other people. Out of their frustrations come little fits of pique that look comic to the other patients. The omniscient doctor strides through the room politely, with a concern that is purely professional. On this remote mountain-top there is no compassion, and truth is dragon-lidded. You might say that "Gabrielle" is "The Time of Your Life" with the warmth and comradeship removed.

What turns it into tragedy is the malicious vanity of Detlev Spinell, a novelist who has invented an artificial system of esthetics to sustain his pride. Although he is a second-

rate writer, he gives himself the illusion of being first-rate by refusing to look at life frankly. Gabrielle is the pretty, simple wife of a blustering man of affairs with a good heart and a coarse desire. She becomes the victim of Spinell's aesthetic vanity. For he builds her up into a mythic heroine, and gathers strength for himself by tormenting her with grandeur she cannot understand. His driving illusions about himself become more deadly than the trivial infirmity that has brought her to the mountain.

If "Gabrielle" is not altogether satisfactory in the theatre, it is partly because Mr. Bercovici has not released the thought that is tightly packed under the story. And it is partly because Mr. Cromwell confuses physical stiffness with intellectual pride and gives a painfully static performance of an active part. Most of "Gabrielle" is very well acted indeed by some interesting players who know

'GABRIELLE'

A play in three acts by Leonardo Bercovici, based on Thomas Mann's "Tristan"; directed by Randolph Carter; setting by Peggy Clark; costumes by Kenn Barr; presented at Maxine Elliott's Theater on March 25, 1941, by Rowland Leigh. The cast:

Fleming.....	Byron McGrath
Rieman.....	John McGovern
General Hobel.....	Martin Wolfson
Detlev Spinell.....	John Cromwell
Frau Spatz.....	Frieda Altman
Fraulein Von Osteloh.....	Grace Coppin
August Schulz.....	Wilton Graff
Holm.....	Whitner Bissell
Doctor Leander.....	Frederic Tozere
Anton Kloterjahn.....	Harold Vermilyea
Gabrielle Kloterjahn.....	Eleanor Lynn
Maid.....	Charlotte Acheson
Patients.....	Elaine Eldridge
	Dwight Marfield

what they are doing. Eleanor Lynn is sublimely charming in the leading part. Frederic Tozere's glacial reserve represents the inhumanity of the doctor's science. As the mountain cynic Byron McGrath gives a dexterous and mordant performance with a reluctance that actually indicates more than he is representing. Martin Wolfson is amusing as a literal-minded general. Grace Coppin translates the slightly written part of a nurse into a lively, fully drawn character, and Frieda Altman makes something intelligible of a spinster. As the husband whose compliance turns into terror, Harold Vermilyea gives a clearly detailed performance. There is also a good portrait of a minor character by Whitner Bissell.

Inside an attractive setting by Peggy Clark, the performance has been ingeniously directed by Randolph Carter. Something that is essential to full artistic expression seems to be wanting in "Gabrielle." But what there is of it is original and haunting. Behind it a piercing intelligence is looking into some dark and lonely places.

Reprinted from NEW YORK JOURNAL AND AMERICAN, March 26, 1941

'Gabrielle' Staged at Maxine Elliott's

Play by Leonardo Bercovici Based on Thomas Mann Story Is
Marked by Generally Excellent Acting

By JOHN ANDERSON

SINCE they are all inmates of a Swiss health resort the chief characters in "Gabrielle" at Maxine Elliott's last night seemed more interesting as symptoms than as people and their drama took on, in consequence, the sanitarium pallor of anemic playwriting. As victims of various polite diseases they were all able to roam cheerfully about the drawing room and talk about themselves; only the plot seemed too feeble to be up and around.

This is the play that Leonardo Bercovici has made from Thomas Mann's short story, "Tristan," and while it promises, in the first act especially, some dramatic quality in its people and their lives, the promise vanishes in a sort of vague inertia. Like the young author who is one of the characters, it has what the doctor describes as "the incompetence of obscurity."

Though it is cloudy with symbolism and half-suggested meanings its tale, essentially, is the story of a young woman brought to the sanitarium by her dotting, successful businessman husband for treatment of a minor ailment. There she meets the young author who assures her that she is some rare, idealized beauty, too good for the man she mar-

ried, an unearthly vision of love and death to be understood only by an artist.

Although she is forbidden by the doctors to play the piano he persuades her to do so, and the play's climax lies in her desperate, impassioned and suicidal playing of the "Liebestod."

Nebulous Stuff

Into such nebulous stuff you read almost anything but the dramatic effect it makes

scarcely worth the trouble. As a comment on the values of art and reality it lacks both definition and focus so that we seem to be searching for clues that are either useless or deliberately veiled. It is like trying to read road signs in a deep and carefully arranged fog.

Some of the characters emerge from the vapours for glimpses that are momentarily interesting. There is the cynic whose caustic disillusion is, they say, the spirit of the sanitarium. There is a broken old general, dingy with medals and disease, waiting cryptically to die. There is a frustrated woman pretending widowhood to hide her husband's desertion. There is a futile youth, heartbroken because the doctor's lady assistant spurns his love because she, in turn, loves the doctor, who doesn't even notice her.

Frail Humanity

They make up an assortment of frail humanity taking refuge in one another's nagging company, avoiding life as surely as they are trying to avoid death. But the playwright never draws a dramatic line under the total, or adds them up for the final accounting of a final curtain. The people drift, as the play does, without impact or force, under the casual steering of an author who seems as detached as the doctor they elect to preside over their fates.

Most of these characters are heightened by the generally excellent performance of a good cast. Eleanor Lynn plays the stricken girl with fine feeling and glowing intensity and John Cromwell indicates vividly the coolly aloof artist who destroys her life. Frederic Tozere portrays the doctor with urbane humor, and there are admirable sketches by Byron McGrath, Martin Wolfson, Frieda Altman and Harold Vermilyea.

But in spite of them it is a dim evening that seems as difficult as a cross-word puzzle in a blackout.

"Gabrielle"

Reprinted from NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, March 26, 1941

Tristan

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

A SORT of chip off the magic mountain, "Gabrielle" is an earnest drama about the joys and sorrows of life in a sanatorium in the Swiss mountains. Based on a story by Thomas Mann called "Tristan," the play by Leonardo Bercovici contemplates with considerable fervor the thoughts and emotions of the tubercular patients, particularly in respect to love. It is a subtle and difficult story that the playwright has to tell; one which might well have taxed the mighty talents of the author of "The Magic Mountain" himself. Therefore it is hardly surprising that the complexities of his narrative are far too much for Mr. Bercovici and that his drama despite some incidental matters of interest, is completely ineffectual.

When he is dealing with his lesser characters, the author of "Gabrielle" has a certain minor success. The patients at Einfried, with their jealousies and complexes, their feuds and their fantasies, are drawn with a great deal of understanding and become figures of considerable interest. It slowly develops, however, that the play is concerned with more specific things. Chiefly it is considering the twisted romance between the second-rate author, Spinell, who thinks of himself as a modern Tristan, and the gentle, bewildered

little wife of a vulgar and uncomprehending business man, Spinell, being an utterly frustrated and ineffectual fellow, concealing his defeat behind a mask of literary superiority, knows that he cannot win Gabrielle, but at least he can drive her to her death, happy in the conviction that he is saving her from her cloddish husband. In the end, though, it is clear that he misunderstood Gabrielle even more than did the despised husband.

It is my impression that this might conceivably have been made into an arresting drama, filled with keen insight into the sub-

tier reaches of the emotions. The only trouble is that the playwright gives no sign of possessing that keen insight. In fact it is only guesswork which enables me to say what he really intends by his narrative, since I do not possess the advantage of knowing Mr. Mann's text. In its attempts to achieve a suggestion of subtlety, the new drama succeeds merely in being vague, confused, undramatic and lacking in conviction, although the minor concerns are well enough manipulated, the three chief figures are set down without the skill needed to make them believable or interesting. No true emotion of any sort finds its way into the unsteady dramaturgy of "Gabrielle," and the play becomes as bleak in its feeling as in its Swiss setting.

There is a touching and sympathetic impersonation of the shy and gentle Gabrielle by that excellent actress, Miss Eleanor Lynn, who is of great help to the entire play. But John Cromwell, as the ineffectual young author, provides a hollow and artificial performance, and Harold Vermilyea, as the husband, brings little but bluster to a role that demands considerably more than that. Several of the minor parts are competently handled. Byron McGrath as a sardonic patient, Frederic Tozere as the doctor and Miss Grace Coppin as the nurse bring credibility to their characterizations, and the other residents at Einfried are believable enough. The defects of "Gabrielle" go deeper than the weaknesses in the playing of two of the three major characters. The chief difficulty is that a play which called for great expertise of treatment has been written without the skill its theme demanded.

Reprinted from NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, March 26, 1941

"Gabrielle," a Story Of the Sanitarium Is on the Sad Side

"Gabrielle," drama by Leonardo Bercovici. Produced by Rowland Leigh at Maxine Elliott's Theatre, New York, March 25, 1941.

★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

"GABRIELLE" is not for the multitude. Not even for that small and rather precious multitude that takes its art where it finds it in the theatre and its content. Even these are pretty sure to find the play at Maxine Elliott's Theatre dull and obscure.

Leonardo Bercovici took "Gabrielle" from the pages of Thomas Mann's "Tristan." Thomas Mann is a distinguished litterateur and a winner of the Nobel prize.

Therefore I am inclined to believe, without knowing "Tristan," that Mr. Bercovici left most of T. M. behind.

"Gabrielle" is a sanitarium romance. It probably bristles with symbols and significant soul analyses that eluded this reporter:

The guests at the sanitarium are ill, either in mind or body, or both. In his novel Mr. Mann was probably able to probe and reveal them with fascinating completeness.

In the play Mr. Bercovici can do no more than set them on the stage, introduce them, and leave them for the audience to study.

Doctor's Dilemma

Anton, the coarse-grained husband of Gabrielle, a frail and sensitive wife, leaves Gabrielle at the sanitarium with what he insists is no more than an irritated trachia. Detlev Spinell, poet and novelist, finds Ga-

brielle and knows that she is wasting away because her spirit is starved for beauty.

Gabrielle has been told to rest, and above all not to play the piano. So young Spinell takes her on long walks and insists, with Mephistophelian insistence, that she play the piano. And play. And play.

So Gabrielle dies. Spinell understands. Anton does not. Neither do we.

Sensitive performance by Eleanor Lynn. You'll remember her as the dentist's romance in "Rocket to the Moon."

Capable performances, considering, by Grace Coppin, Frieda Altman, Harold Vermilyea, Frederic Tozere, Byron McGrath, Whitner Bissell.

John Cromwell was pretty smug as Spinell, but that may have been his author's or his director's fault.

Reprinted from
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
March 26, 1941

The Sad Fate Of Gabrielle

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

FROM a not very good early story of Thomas Mann's, Mr. Bercovici has made an extremely bad play. In *Tristan*, Mann dealt crudely—and almost to the point of travesty—with themes that he elsewhere brought magnificently to life. Setting his story, as he was later to set *The Magic Mountain*, in a sanitarium, Mann dealt for one thing with the relation of the sick to the spiritual. For another, he posed the eternal conflict between the philistine spirit and the artistic, and with brutal irony let the philistine carry the day. Imperfectly handled by Mann, these themes were at least clearly set forth. They are not clearly set forth in *Gabrielle*; they get lost, they become mere mannerisms. The story of the lovely Gabrielle, whose health was wrecked in bearing her gross bourgeois husband a child, and of the high-falutin' artist who falls soulfully in love with her, becomes empty and bloodless and even ridiculous on the stage. It's all too utterly utter, without seeming (as it does in Mann's story) intentionally so. Perhaps the fault is not entirely Mr. Bercovici's; perhaps the stage cannot handle serious burlesque.

To fill out his play, Mr. Bercovici has described the life of the sanitarium, and here he fares a trifle better. The patients, with their violent crochets and sick men's jokes and inbred animosities, do at least give us a picture of a strange way of life. But they talk too much and say too little, and at best they do not count very heavily in a play whose ideas are muddled, whose action is undramatic, and whose chief characters are unreal. As the lovely, shadowy Gabrielle, Eleanor Lynn—through the charm of her looks and the sensibility of her acting—brought something to the play that no one else did. The other parts were not to blame; their parts had them tied in knots.

"Native Son"

Reprinted from NEW YORK SUN, March 25, 1941

Richard Wright's 'Native Son' Is Offered at the St. James Theater

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

NOT all of the qualities which made Richard Wright's "Native Son" so grimly impressive a novel have been retained in the stage version, which Mr. Wright put together with the assistance of Paul Green and which Orson Welles presents at the St. James with effective theatricalism. Now and then last evening it seemed a little, indeed, as if the collaborators had missed their own point and lost their way in the violence of their story. But if part is lost, much still remains.

Bigger Thomas himself remains, thanks in a large part to a beautifully sustained performance by Canada Lee. He remains at life size and life thickness, at once a suffering individual and a symbol of the sufferings of his race. Bigger is a big, tough, stupid Negro who lives bewildered in a world of fear. Mr. Wright wrote of him without palliation but with deep understanding. And because of the author's honesty of dealing, because he shunned any sentimental idealization of his character, the book took on stature as an indictment of conditions of which Bigger was a victim. The honesty of the method remains in the play, along with the melodramatic story of Bigger's short, violent life.

Bigger came out of the slums for a moment in Chicago. Suddenly he was hurled, through the agency of a white girl who was a sentimental rebel, against convention, into a world of confusing uncertainties. To this confusion he responded violently. He killed the girl by accident. Then, when terror took hold of him, he went on in a kind of frenzy of fear and hate to burn her body, extort ransom from her father and finally—although this is glossed over in the play—kill the girl of his own race who was his only touch with love. And implicit in all this, the more powerful because it did not need to be stated, was the picture of Bigger as a victim of condi-

tions in society which made any other life for him impossible.

In the play this story is told in a series of dramatic, often melodramatic scenes. Most of them are in themselves brilliantly effective, although one or two, and unfortunately the most important, are weakened by the director's virtuosity and, to a degree, by the dramatist's words. There are often too many words. Bigger explains himself with uncharacteristic eloquence—the stage's unsatisfactory substitute, this, for the novel's analysis of character. And, broken up, the story moves jumpily and important subsidiary characters are underdeveloped. In spite of several direct explanations which the authors have interlarded, the play comes close to degenerating into episodes of merely physical violence.

To allay any possible doubt as to what is meant, however, the authors close with several lengthy lectures. These are all very well in themselves, except that they are long and repetitious, but they are not essentially dramatic. They are taken pretty directly from the novel, where they were tedious and unnecessary. Now they provide a dwindling conclu-

'NATIVE SON'

A play in ten scenes, by Paul Green and Richard Wright, based on Mr. Wright's novel of the same title; production by Orson Welles; settings by James Morcom; presented by Orson Welles and John Houseman in association with Bern Bernard, as a Mercury production at the St. James Theater on March 24, 1941. The cast:

Bigger Thomas	Canada Lee
Hannah Thomas	Evelyn Ellis
Vera Thomas	Helen Martin
Buddy Thomas	Lloyd Warren
A Neighbor	Jacqueline Ghandt
Miss Emmett	Ellen Burns
Jack	J. Flashes Riley
Clara	Rena Mitchell
G. H. Rankin	Rodester Timmons
Gus Mitchell	Wardell Saunders
Ernie Jones	C. M. Bootsie Davis
Mr. Dalton	Erskine Sanford
Mrs. Dalton	Nell Harrison
Britten	Everett Sloane
Peggy	Frances Bavier
Jan Erlone	Joseph Fevney
Buckley	Philip Bourneuf
Paul Max	Ray Collins
A Reporter	George Zarn
Judge	William Malone
Newspaper Men	John Berry
	Stephen Roberts
	Don Roberts

slon to a play which, in spite of all its flaws, has the violence of life in it and a vitality which nothing can dim.

Mr. Lee's performance has all this vitality. More, its finely sustained force and understanding knit the play together and go a long way toward providing the unity not always apparent in the script. Miss Anne Burr is excellent in the brief part of the murdered girl. Nell Harrison gives her blind mother a special, almost unearthly quality in a few short scenes. Evelyn Ellis contributes a richly comprehended portrait of Bigger's docile, religious mother, and half a dozen lesser parts are well acted. And James Morcom has provided grimly imaginative sets which seem to walk Bigger into his world of limitations and terrors.

Reprinted from NEW YORK TIMES, March 25, 1941

'Native Son,' by Paul Green and Richard Wright, Put On by Orson Welles and John Houseman

By BROOKS ATKINSON

OUT of Richard Wright's novel, "Native Son," Mr. Wright and Paul Green have written a powerful drama. Orson Welles has staged it with imagination and force. Those are the first things to be said about the overwhelming play that opened at the St. James last evening. But they hardly convey the excitement of the first performance of a play that represents experience of life and conviction in thought and a production that represents a dynamic use of the stage.

Mr. Wright's long and pulsing novel of a Negro boy's snarling rebellion against a white man's world was vividly subjective in expression. Particularly toward the end it poked into painful psychological details. In the drama Mr. Green and Mr. Wright work in a more objective style. Without the subjective background their defense of Bigger Thomas's ghastly crime in the court-scene sounds like general pleading. It lacks the stinging enlightenment of the last third of Mr. Wright's novel.

But that completes this column's bill of exceptions to the biggest American drama of the season. For Mr. Green and Mr. Wright have translated a murder story into a portrait of racial fright and hatred and given it a conclusion that brings peace to a taunt, bewildered mind. Bigger Thomas is an ignorant Negro boy who hates a world that has imprisoned him with shadowy forces he does not understand. On the one side he smolders with re-

sentment; on the other he is panicky with fright. He murders the daughter of his white employer in terror and by accident. But the murder gives him a sense of power and achievement. Now he is a man of action, fighting the enemy for his own life. He is captured, of course, in a manhunt through Chicago's cookeries, and his lawyer parades him to plead guilty in the courts. At the trial his lawyer defends him, not on the facts of the case, which are hopeless, but on the causes of Bigger's psychological tangle. As he stands in the death cell Bigger for the first time understands that he is a member of the human race.

Roughly that is the motive which distin-

guishes "Native Son" from the run-of-the-mine crime play and the ordinary thriller. In staging it Mr. Welles picks up the bravura style of the Mercury Theatre where he left it two or three seasons ago. In ten savory scenes, acted on different levels with a resourceful use of the stage, he runs through the narrative, giving motion to static scenes by flares of light and putting "Native Son" into its urban environment by a varied use of sound accompaniment. Mr. Welles is a dramatic showman; he likes big scenes, broad sweeps of color and vigorous contrasts in tempo. He likes theatre that gingles with life. Once or twice, perhaps, the exigencies of the script drive him into a melodramatic absurdity, like the rumble of the automatic furnace stoker. If it were not for the plot Mr. Welles and the millionaire Dalton could change to a silent oilburner. But the production as a whole represents theatre that has been released from stuffy conventions.

In Canada Lee, the authors and producers have an actor for whom they should be devoutly thankful. As Bigger Thomas, he gives a clean, honest, driving performance of remarkable versatility. Mr. Lee has already had an extraordinary career as prize-fighter, violinist, band leader and host of the "Chicken Coop" in Harlem. As an actor he is superb.

Not all of the acting measures up to the play or performance. Perhaps Mr. Welles is not sufficiently interested in the minor parts. But Ray Collins gives a straightforward, homely performance as the defense attorney, and makes his points more graphically in the acting than in the script. Everett Sloane is excellent as a nervous functionary in the Dalton household. Philip Bourneuf, Evelyn Ellis, Paul Stewart, Rena Mitchell and Frances Bavier play their parts with flavor or conviction as the case may be. "Native Son" is drama and theatre with mind and style of its own.

"Native Son"

Reprinted from NEW YORK POST, March 25, 1941

Orson Welles Presents Mr. Wright's "Native Son"

By JOHN MASON BROWN

IN TRYING to bring "Native Son" to the stage, Orson Welles and those associated with him have perhaps done better than might be expected with the impossible. At least twice during the evening in the scene of Mary Dalton's murder and in the episode by the furnace when a suspicious reporter exposes Bigger's guilt—the production at the St. James achieves something closely akin to the terror, the horror, and the almost unbearable suspense of Richard Wright's novel.

Certainly no one could ask for a more satisfactory physical or vocal representation of all that is tortured, harried, and understandably resentful in the Negro who is Mr. Wright's tragic hero than Canada Lee supplies. Throughout the evening he serves as a perfect illustration in an incomplete text. Mr. Lee is a fine actor who—so far as words, gestures, looks, and spirit goes—is finely able to communicate the complex emotions which must boil within the anguished heart of Bigger. In every objective way Mr. Lee realizes the stifled goodness, the justifiable ferocity, the cornered desperation, and the final poignant sense which must invade Bigger that he has just begun to live in the hours after he has been doomed to die.

If Mr. Welles's production is fortunate in its Bigger, it is also fortunate in the calm eloquence and compassion of Ray Collins's Max, that lawyer who in defending Bigger properly indicts our civilization for its patent barbarism, but whose Communism is now only timidly suggested. The production is fortunate, too, in Nell Harrison's gentle performance as the blind Mrs. Dalton, and in the courage with which Anne Burr must quickly try to indicate the qualities of the ill-fated Mary Dalton.

If one excepts, as except one must, the room in the deserted house where the hunted Bigger takes refuge and which at the St. James resembles nothing so much as the tobacco barn that was the scene of John Wilkes Booth's capture, the production is

likewise fortunate in its backgrounds. James Morcom's settings are strong, simple, atmospheric, and quickly moved. The endless bricks with which they are hedged in on an adjustable front curtain are admirable symbols of the bleak outlook and heartbreaking confinement of a tragic people.

Here, however, praise for Mr. Welles's production (smooth-running though it is) comes to an end. Here misgivings, disappointments, doubts, and questions insist upon becoming vocal. Unquestionably, "Native Son" is a play with more to say than most. In subject, intention, and sometimes in treatment it is provocative, in spite of the feebleness of its initial courtroom interludes. At least it is trying to get something said which deserves both a saying and a hearing. This much is always clear.

But (and this should really be printed as the hugest of "buts"), no matter how conscientiously you may think Paul Green and Mr. Wright have faced the problem of dramatizing Mr. Wright's novel, or how much you may admire aspects of the physical production which their dramatization has been given at the St. James, it is impossible not to realize that "Native Son" at its best on the stage is

as nothing compared to "Native Son" at its crudest in book form.

It Should Be Read

The sledge-hammer impact and nerve-racking excitement of the story; the insistent and terrible swiftness of its action; the full devastation of its exposure of the wounding truth—these are almost as woefully missing at the St. James as they were bound to be. Because Mr. Wright's novel was (and is) much, much more, of course, than the melodramatic story of a Negro sentenced to the chair for having murdered a white girl in his fear without having meant to do so, for having disposed of her body in a furnace, and for any thing—again out of fear—bashed in the face of the colored girl who was his sweetheart and knew his secret. More than being the saga of an ill-used individual, "Native Son" in book form was the searingly eloquent statement of the tragedy of a tragic people. It achieved its full scale and implication by what was essentially subjective in its writing. The world as Bigger saw it was so vital a part of its truth that what Bigger did (though that was terrible) was not half as important as what he thought (which was far more terrible) and made his actions understandable. Seeing into his mind, we were forced to realize that our crimes mattered more than and were responsible for his.

Without sharing Bigger's thoughts and with only the chronicle of his actions before us, "Native Son" is bound to seem mere skeleton, a noon-time shadow, of its true and former self. It may be serviceable enough for synopsis-lovers who have not read Mr. Wright's novel. In spite of such a weakening of effect as occurs when Bessie (Bigger's girlfriend) is changed into a shadowy maiden known as Clara and shot by the police instead of being murdered by Bigger, it certainly comes across the footlights as a better dramatic statement of the original than was Mr. Kearney's dramatization of "An American Tragedy," though heaven knows, that is saying nothing.

It may satisfy those who can't read, or even such people as those who can and yet who think they are enjoying Mr. Morley's "Kitty Foyle" when they see the pleasant film which masquerades under that title. But much as one may admire Mr. Lee's acting, Mr. Morcom's settings, and Mr. Welles's intentions, one is forced to ask why—why—why any one should have wanted to take a story that has been as superlatively well realized as was "Native Son" in the scope of its original medium, and expose it to the unavoidable limitations of another?

Reprinted from NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM," March 25, 1941

The Tragic Saga of Bigger Thomas Makes Vivid Theater

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

THE soundest way to review *Native Son*, I think, is to review it twice: first as a thing in itself, and then in comparison with the novel from which it was adapted.

Taken by itself, it is a thoroughly effective piece of theater. Even for one who has read the novel—and certainly for any one who hasn't—it is tense, dramatic and frequently compelling. Its ten scenes in the life of Bigger Thomas move swiftly and build firmly; and by staging them without intermission—as he staged *Julius Caesar*—Orson Welles has maintained an excited pitch and given the play a rewarding compactness. If there is as much sheer theater as there is drama in Mr. Welles's production, the theater does not, for the most part, vulgarize the drama when it occurs.

On the stage, too, Bigger Thomas breaks through as a genuine personality. Canada Lee plays him with both force and understanding, and with the ability to express his violent, inarticulate emotions. Bigger, early in the play, is a brutal young Negro, surly with his family, bullying with his gang, in whom there smoulders a fierce resentment toward a world that hems him in and holds

him down. After he accidentally murders his employer's daughter, he becomes largely a creature of fear until, as the police close round him, there swells up once again a compulsive anarchic defiance. The last scene, in his death cell, shows a change in Bigger but (unlike the book) scarcely explains it.

Tragic Case History

Native Son is a vivid evening in the theater, a tragic case history of a morally

mangled victim of society and circumstance. All the same, the play lacks the richness and subterranean power of the book, as well as the essential meaning. If it succeeds on its own terms—as the somewhat comparable dramatization of *An American Tragedy* never did—it succeeds only so. Far too much has gone out of it. The whole continuous analysis of Bigger's mind and emotions has gone out of it—the fierce black man's hate for the whites, the terrible inner deadness of spirit, the liberation through crime—crime that is the only creative outlet Bigger can command, and the only freedom he can know. Gone are the psychology of race and individual alike. Bigger, on the stage, is much more of a primitive figure than a frustrated one; which is why, on the stage, his actual crime rather than his whole chaotic life becomes the mainspring of his destiny. This is a distortion, at the very least; and in the truest sense it is a misrepresentation.

The social indictment of *Native Son* also loses, though not to the same extent, on the stage. We do not get the book's downpressing, unanswerable charge against the white race for crushing and crippling the black one, for selfishly producing thousands of Bigger Thomases at every step. The indictment is there, and not to be sidestepped; but Bigger unfortunately seems rather more the victim of circumstances than of society. On the other hand, if much of the power of the book is removed from the play, so is much of the overt propaganda, which was a glaring weakness in the novel.

As Bigger, Mr. Lee naturally dominated the action, but Evelyn Ellis as Bigger's mother and Ray Collins as Bigger's lawyer were also decidedly effective, and most of the other roles were played adequately if no better. James Morcom's miniature settings are excellent.

"Native Son"

Reprinted from NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, March 25, 1941

"Native Son" Stirs Audience to Emotional Pitch at the St. James

"Native Son," drama by Paul Green and Richard Wright, from the novel of Mr. Wright. Produced by Orson Welles and John Houseman in association with Bern Bernard at the St. James Theatre, New York, March 24, 1941.

★ ★ ★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

ALL things have worked together for good theatre in the transfer to the stage of Richard Wright's crudely powerful novel called "Native Son." Paul Green and Mr. Wright have reproduced the sensitive heart and the hulking body of the tale without lessening its dramatic impact.

Orson Welles has preserved the vigor and simplicity of the characters and held the story taut. He has also tricked it out with the kind of continuity and suspense that he did not have to learn in Hollywood, though that may be charged against him.

These were part of his equipment before he ever saw California. He had them working beautifully one memorable night in New Jersey, you may recall.

The result is the best, and likewise the most sensational, of this season's dramas. You may remind me, if you like, that it has been a season pretty barren of effective drama, but that will not take anything from my belief in the Wellesian triumph.

The Welles Touch

It is, I think, pretty much Wellesian. It is he who has staged the play in dim lights and cut out intermissions. It is he who has seen that the scenes are held together by symphonic binders reproducing the raucous noises of the city streets, or the wild noises of its slums and dives, tenements and hideaways.

It is he who has seen that most of the acting is slow and impressive in tempo; that the speech is clear, the arguments sharply

pointed, the sympathies of a receptive audience effectively played upon.

He even saw to it that there were no programs to tempt folks to light matches for a peek at the cast.

Bigger Thomas is craftily developed as a victim of a large assortment of a selfish humanity's sins, and a few that can be traced directly to the American way of life.

Yes, sir, it is we, or some several thousand of us, who force the Bigger Thomases on relief, and into alleys, and one-room tenements. It is also we, or other thousands of us, who give them the same chance the Daltons gave this hero, only to find that by that time they are so afraid to trust the best of us that they go on taking their developed fear and hatreds out on the rest of us.

Stripped to its theatrical bones "Native Son" is no more than the story of a rebellious Negro who was all set for a life of crime when

he got a chauffeur's job with the rich and kindly Daltons.

In Trouble

There he ran into the spoiled and dissolute daughter of the house. She playfully appointed him her body guard and tried to make him an equal to show her contempt for the class into which she was born.

The night he helped her, drunk, to her room, and her blind mother came and might have discovered them, the Negro accidentally strangled the girl to keep her from crying out.

He burned the body in the furnace, and later wrote a note demanding ransom, and tried to glory in the crime that had made a scarehead big shot of him.

But the law ran him down and he was convicted and sent to the chair, following the usual pleading of the state's officers for justice and protection for the whites and the plea of the defense for mercy and understanding and justice for the blacks, not in the name of God, but in the name of ourselves.

Four Star

A commonplace plot, a series of more or less stock dramatic situations, but with a difference in their staging and their handling that gives "Native Son" its extra star, and its finer quality as a theatre experience.

The playing is uniform and never cheapened, though Everett Sloane does get a bit shrill in a scene or two. Canada Lee is a perfect selection for Bigger Thomas, modest, reticent, simple-minded, fumbling, yet fired with a fixed conviction and eloquently pathetic.

Anne Burr has a difficult scene as the daughter, but manages it splendidly. Evelyn Ellis and a number of other colored players are well in character. The Daltons are nicely realized by Erskine Sanford and Neil Harrison. The settings are by James Morcom and amazingly atmospheric and helpful. There were cheers from last night's audience.

Reprinted from NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, March 25, 1941

Killer at Large

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

FROM Richard Wright's powerful and frightening novel, "Native Son," an interesting melodramatic adaptation has been made by Mr. Wright and Paul Green.

Directed with showy effectiveness by Orson Welles and excitingly played by that excellent Negro actor, Canada Lee, the dramatization is shrewd and impressive, telling with bitter forthrightness the painful story of sullen, tortured Bigger Thomas, the snarlingly bewildered offspring of race injustice, and his tracking down by the law for the unintentional killing of the foolish white girl who thought that she could teach him her callow radicalism. With but one important change of detail, the play follows the novel with fidelity in story, viewpoint and preachment, and in it you will find the letter and the spirit of the original maintained with great care. Nevertheless, the drama, for all that, is considerably less impressive than the book from which it is derived.

For that fact, no one connected with the production of "Native Son" on the stage is seriously to blame. It merely happens that the novel, for all its melodramatic events and highly colored emotions, was essentially a sociological study of remarkable power and import. Apparently the author wasn't completely aware of his success, since, after making his point with inescapable clarity in his narrative, he began to doubt himself and made it all over again at great length in some prosy

didactic passages. What he was saying, of course, was that society in general, with its racial prejudices and economic injustices, was to blame for the wickedness of Bigger Thomas and that, compared to all of us, Bigger was an innocent man. The play, by its very nature, concentrates on the external events of the narrative, leaving the import of its story rather in the background and depending on the harangue of the attorney for the defense to make its editorial viewpoint clear.

It all goes to indicate that when a story was intended for one medium of expression and was entirely successful in employing that medium, it is dangerous to use some other narrative form for which it was not essentially planned. The melodrama of "Native

Son" is successful on the stage and the speech of the left-wing attorney has significance and dramatic fervor, but the entire impact is inescapably less impressive than in the case of the novel. Even if you have not read the book I think you will find that "Native Son" is not always completely comfortable in the theatre, that it is trying to say something that it does not invariably succeed in dramatizing. Yet it is a taut and almost constantly arresting drama, uncomfortably close to the ugly truth in its outspoken forcefulness and played to the hilt by a first-rate cast. The one change, by the way, lies in the character of Bigger's mistress—Bessie in the novel; Clara in the play—and the manner of her unhappy death.

Mr. Welles's direction is imaginative and resourceful, even though he has been called upon to give the Dalton home a furnace that makes more noise than all of the Herald Tribune presses. As for Mr. Lee's performance in the leading role, it is so honest, moving and generally impressive that it gives the play not only force but dignity and a wry sort of pity. Miss Anne Burr, a new young actress of much promise, plays with directness and entire lack of any appeal for sympathy the role of the rich girl who, in her well meaning, drunken arrogance, leads Bigger to a crime he never intended. The radical lawyer is well handled by Ray Collins, and Paul Stewart plays with great effectiveness the newspaper man who traps the killer in the most dramatic scene in the play. Miss Rena Mitchell is believable as the unhappy Clara, who is shot by the police rather than by her terrified lover, and the other roles are sensibly managed. James Morcom's settings are helpful. "Native Son" on the stage is an effective carbon copy of an impressive novel, but the novel remains the important thing.

"Native Son"

Reprinted from NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, March 25, 1941

Native Son Stark Drama Stamped with Genius

By SIDNEY B. WHIPPLE

THE Mercury production of *Native Son*, translated into dramatic terms by Paul Green and Richard Wright and directed by Orson Welles, is stamped with genius. It brings to the stage in 10 powerful scenes the high tragedy of Mr. Wright's original work, a relentless, cruel and compelling document that holds the listener in its emotional grip long after the curtain has descended. It is a triumph for Mr. Welles, but it is no less a triumph for his fellow workers, its author and its actors.

It proves, furthermore, that Orson Welles, whether you like to admit it or not, is no boy wonder but actually the greatest theatrical director of the modern stage. He is bold, ruthless and unshamed in his assault upon your emotions. He tricks your senses and pounds upon your feelings. And he brings this play through constantly rising tension and continuously mounting passion to a climax that makes the brain reel with the impact.

As a sociological study the significance of *Native Son* is artfully expressed in the original novel is subordinated to the dramatic values of the story. Mr. Welles has seemed to care less about the causes imbedded in our dark history that create Negro killers like the fearful Bigger Thomas than in the melodramatic events in which they figure. True the stage play does touch upon the poverty and ignorance and discrimination that combine to keep a race in subjection and fear, and in the closing scenes there is a powerful indictment of a hypocritical civilization that fosters

those conditions, proclaiming the while its devotion to the principle of equality of opportunity. But throughout the play the spectator is seeing and living life rather than analyzing it.

Mr. Welles insists, and I think he is absolutely right about it, upon staging his 10 scenes consecutively without an intermission. He refuses to permit a mood to be destroyed after it has been built up with such painstaking skill. Certainly no one in the audience can feel the need of entracte refreshment while this grim story is unfolding on the St. James stage.

Of the 10 scenes four stand out with extraordinary power. The first is one wherein Bigger Thomas' character is first fully revealed, with an ingrained hatred and fear of the white race and his childish reliance upon force—the machine gun and the airplane—to overturn the oppressors. The second is the

bedroom scene, in which Bigger smothered the drunken daughter of his employer in a paroxysm of fear lest he be found with her. The third is a scene in the furnace room, where a reporter discovers the truth of Bigger's crime and the panic-stricken Negro breaks away to his short freedom. And finally there is a courtroom scene dominated by the defense counsel and his oration against age-long injustice.

James Morcom's settings, framed by solid brick walls, are magnificent and the lighting is spectacularly effective. In the murder scene, it might be noted, the bedroom and the figures in it are dimly seen as silhouettes, with a faint, bluish light emphasizing the luxuriousness of the room.

Mr. Welles's choice of talent for this dramatic tour de force was wise. As Bigger Thomas he elected Canada Lee, who last night displayed a virility that was scarcely hinted at when he appeared two or three years ago as Christopher in the Federal Theater production *Haiti*. Whether raging against his masters or demeaning himself in fear, Mr. Lee gave a performance that was reckless or restrained, according to the demand of the scene, and his transitions from mumbling fright to raging courage were miraculously effective.

Several of the players who were discovered by Mr. Welles in his jolting experiences with *Citizen Kane*, the long-promised movie, are with him in *Native Son*. Most prominent among them is Ray Collins, who has the burden of the long speech by the attorney as the play nears its close. Mr. Collins was cheered (perhaps for the sentiments of that oration, although I would like to think it was because of his own perfection) and deserves the highest praise for his portrayal.

Others who were of vast assistance in building up the realism of *Native Son* were Everett Sloane as the rich man's secretary, Paul Stewart as the newspaperman, Anne Burr as the murdered girl, Evelyn Thomas as Bigger's mother and Philip Bourneau as the district attorney.

Native Son is decidedly not a pleasant play nor is it escapism. It is stark melodrama, touched by the hand of genius.

Reprinted from NEW YORK JOURNAL AND AMERICAN, March 25, 1941

'Native Son' Links Red, Racial Themes

Dramatization of Negro Novel Provides Propaganda Parallel to Recent Strubing Case

By JOHN ANDERSON

WITH the help of Paul Green, the eminent playwright, Richard Wright, Negro author, turned his novel, "Native Son," into a play of the same name, an uneven play in ten scenes with no intermission, which opened at the St. James Theatre last night.

Three of the scenes have the power and effect of high tension melodrama, and they are all helped enormously by the eloquent and vivid performance of a young Negro actor named Canada Lee. But the rest of the play seemed overwrought with a sort of monotonous hysteria, phony in its argument and finally tiresome.

Its argument suggests its real weakness as drama, and it must be taken on its own terms as a drama with an argument. Though the novel was written long before the Strubing case in Greenwich last December, the story closely parallels that celebrated event, and is, in a sense, refuted by it.

For it is the contention of the authors of "Native Son" that the young Negro chauffeur on trial in their play is the victim of racial oppression, and that he was driven to murder by fear. The fact that he is an admitted criminal and as such is treated the same way the law treats members of the red, yellow, and even the white race, is glossed over blithely for the purpose of raising a racial issue and

twisting it into propaganda that seems nearer Moscow than Harlem.

Since Mr. Wright, the original author, has been a staff member of both the *Daily Worker* and the *New Masses*, and even approved the fantastic Soviet "trial," it may be that his idea of justice has been warped to acquit party members of any charge but execute everybody else.

When compared to the honest indignation and compassion that such a play, for example, as "They Shall Not Die" brought to the similar subject matter of the Scottsboro case this play seems not only untrue, but a little foolish.

It would take an imbecilic combination of Polynanna and Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss to pretend that all is for the best in this best of all possible worlds. No country has ever had a special monopoly on injustice. We are just now in the midst of trying to defend the rights of racial and religious minorities, and while "Native Son" would seem to diabolize all such argument as hopelessly sentimental bourgeois balderdash (suitably tainted by capitalism, et cetera) I wonder if it would dare come out flatly and say that any sort of minority has a gasp of a chance under Stalin or his Fascist brothers in blood.

Yet that is what it is trying to say, as far as I could make out—by implication, and out of the corner of its mouth. That is why it doesn't seem credibly dramatic, at least to me, whose ideology has not been massaged by the Bolsheviks. It might as well set up the intellectual proof that we can all achieve permanent happiness by yanking ourselves to the moon by our own bootstraps.

Its argument has the miasmic monotony of a political panacea good for all racial aches of a snake doctor chanting the witchpower and democratic pains, and a boozy binge into the bargain before the hangover sets in.

The fact that three of its scenes have force and vivid impact springs not only from the production and Mr. Lee's superb acting, but from the tragedy of human misfortune which the play catches now and then.

The hideous mistake of the crime itself, the stealthily detection of it, and finally the muted passion of the man awaiting death at the end—all these strike notes on the dramatic scale that are grievously compelling and inescapable.

But even on their own terms the authors suggest that it is all accidental. The vaguely classical sense of fateful inadvertence is, indeed, the play's chief hold on the emotions, its brightest ornament of humanity.

The play's theme seems to deflate itself as it goes along instead of increasing in its power or persuasiveness, and if this democratic heresy is a shooting offense I pray the comrades are mercifully better shots than they are dramatists.

"My Fair Ladies"

Reprinted from NEW YORK SUN, March 24, 1941

'My Fair Ladies,' Routine Comedy, Opens at the Hudson Theater

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

AN ENTIRELY meaningless anecdote about a couple of show girls who pretended to be titled Britons, thus creating a small, routine ripple in the dignified life of the village of Mount Kisco, was told in painstaking detail last evening at the Hudson Theater. It is an anecdote that only a couple of authors could love, and the authors in this case are Arthur L. Jarrett and Marcel Klauber. The title of their play is "My Fair Ladies."

Probably it is futile to describe "My Fair Ladies" in much detail. The show girls, whose masquerade was vaguely inadvertent and turned out in the end to be of great advantage to Britain, were hospitably received by a Mr. and Mrs. Gage, who had long been wanting to show the neighbors that they were just as good as a snooty Mrs. Stiles. When Mrs. Stiles discovered the imposture, she was all for having everybody arrested. She was talked out of this. Vague young men were found to marry the show girls and another romance between a couple of ghost-like characters came out all right, too.

But there is no reason for us to be bothering our heads with these matters. What is Mrs. Stiles to us, or we to Mrs. Stiles, that we should ponder with Mr. Jarrett and Mr. Klauber on her discomfiture? Let them wade glum-

ly through the morass of their plot, their hands full of loose ends and half-baked characters always under foot. "My Fair Ladies" is merely a tiresome little play, such as one may expect to come up in the spring, and nothing to brood over.

It does, to be sure, give a good many actors a bad time, requiring them to dart on-stage, say a few words, and dodge anxiously off again to clear the way for more plot. All of them are energetic and some are able enough and Miss Ethel Morrison even manages at odd moments to animate the character of Mrs. Stiles. This is quite a trick, but hardly worth turning.

Reprinted from NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, March 24, 1941

Quiet Night

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

FOR a simple little comedy, "My Fair Ladies" is remarkably complicated. A childish narrative told in words of one syllable, it still is so mixed up with subplots of one kind or another that it makes for confusion as well as dullness. Real estate in Florida, dyspomania, three or four romances, social rivalries in Mount Kisco and British espionage secrets are all entangled with the story of two American chorus girls who pretend to be titled English refugees, and the baffled bewilderments that result are among the less edifying aspects of the drama season. From time to time the play stops to pay a glancing compliment to British courage, but I do not think it likely that "My Fair Ladies" will add any more to international friendship than it will to the theater.

It probably is unnecessary to add that when some of us speak of our desire to see a few plays that have some bearing on the current state of the world, we don't mean anything like "My Fair Ladies." Those references to air-raid shelters, the bombing of London and the remarks of Col. Lindbergh do not give the new comedy by Arthur L. Jarrett and Marcel Klauber any suggestion of topical interest. They merely accentuate the insipid phoeness of the entire play. Since, despite all the plot that goes into the work, there is no hint of effective comedy or drama or characterization or imagination, a completely pallid and laborious evening ensues. "My Fair Ladies" is no "Poppy," but it isn't far from one, and,

speaking of nadirs, it isn't as comic as the unforgotten "Boudoir."

A number of players with respectable reputations have been gathered together for the unenticing antics at the Hudson Theater. Miss Celeste Holm, who is a good actress, is one of the refugee show girls and Miss Betty Furness, a fugitive from Hollywood, is the other one, and both of them do their best to make human beings out of the wooden characters they are playing. Russell Hardie, a young actor of ability, has what is fondly supposed to be a fresh comedy role, and he manages it with some skill. A glance over the program reveals such recognizable performers as Miss Ethel Morrison, Herbert Yost, Otto Hulett and Thomas Coley working away devotedly in parts unworthy of any one's attention. For over a week the first-nighters have been awaiting a new play, and then they are given "My Fair Ladies." They hardly deserve it.

'MY FAIR LADIES'

A comedy in three acts by Arthur L. Jarrett and Marcel Klauber. Directed by Albert Lewis; setting by Watson Barratt presented at the Hudson Theater on March 23, 1941, by Albert Lewis and Max Siegel. The cast:

Heien Gage.....	Mary Sargent
Bailey.....	Charles Furcolowe
Jones.....	Jean Cleveland
Griggs.....	Henry Vincent
Philip Gage.....	Vincent Donahue
Joyce Gage.....	Toni Gilman
Richard Tolliver.....	Russell Hardie
Henry Gage.....	Herbert Yost
Ned Tate.....	Thomas Coley
Lady Keith-Odlyn.....	Celeste Holm
Lady Palfrey-Stuart.....	Betty Furness
Tony Stiles.....	Alfred Etcheverry
Mrs. Belden S. Stiles.....	Ethel Morrison
Max.....	Arthur Hughes
Miss Grumley.....	Jacqueline Susann
Driscoll (Happy) Melton.....	Otto Hulett
Pinnegan.....	Randolph Preston
Capt. Lake.....	Lionel Ince

Reprinted from
NEW YORK TIMES
March 24, 1941

Springtime for Broadway

By BROOKS ATKINSON

WITHOUT poking his nose outdoors a theatregoer can tell when Spring is arriving. Innocuous comedies like "My Fair Ladies" begin to poke their heads out of the leaf-mold and turn their innocent faces up to the spotlight. This one has been written by Arthur L. Jarrett and Marcel Klauber, and it was performed at the Hudson last evening inside a cheerful, Springlike setting by Watson Barratt. When the plot complications had been carefully resolved a number of vernal playgoers were murmuring "nice" or "cute," and a few philanthropists were shouting "Author!" if they were careless, or "Authors!" if they were exacting about details.

Whether or not the authors appeared, this theatregoer is unable to report, for he had to see a man about a sheet of copy. "My Fair Ladies" is a comedy about two American showgirls who find themselves impersonating Lady Keith-Odlyn and Lady Palfrey-Stuart in a Mount Kisco residence. When they were stranded in London, a friend in the Foreign Office had issued them false passports to get them out from under foot. Arriving in America in a Clipper they are whisked off to a private home as upper-class refugees, both of them, incidentally, reported as being in an interesting condition. They are social sensations until the duplicity gets out. Conspiring with the suave British Government, the authors straighten things out in the last act with an ingenuity that can only be marveled at. Give the authors of "My Fair Ladies" rope enough and they can uncoil themselves out of anything.

According to Winter standards, it is a silly play and, to tell the truth, the acting is not much better. Betty Furness and Celeste Holm are trying their luck with the showgirls. Russell Hardie, Ethel Morrison, Herbert Yost, Mary Sargent, Otto Hulett and quite a lot of people flutter hopefully over the other parts. But all of them must envy Henry Vincent, who has a part he could play with his eyes shut. Cast as an English butler, he walks deferentially through the living room with a plate in his hand. There are no problems for Henry Vincent.

"My Fair Ladies"

Reprinted from NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, March 24, 1941

"My Fair Ladies" Is A Comedy About Two Unhappy Chorus Gals

"My Fair Ladies," comedy by Arthur L. Jarrett and Marcel Klaubner. Produced by Albert Lewis and Max Siegel at the Hudson Theatre, New York, March 23, 1941.

★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

THE two young women who are the heroines of "My Fair Ladies" began their adventures at the Hudson Theatre last night an act late. They should have started in London, or maybe Lisbon, when they first conceived an idea of taking flight in a clipper plane on a couple of phony passports.

There may have been fun in that part of their adventure. There is none in their experiences after they arrive at LaGuardia field and are whisked away to Mt. Kisco as a couple of young matrons representing what you might call the pregnant British nobility.

On this side of the ocean they are imposters from the first, and not at all good at the job. So nobody is interested.

All this, naturally, is due to a miscalculation on the part of their authors, the Messrs. Jarrett and Klaubner, and will doubtless be corrected when the Warner Brothers' scenarists start work turning "My Fair Ladies" into a Class B picture. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if the Warner boys got their investment back that way.

Not for Broadway

Meantime there is nothing to hold out as a promise to prospective patrons at the Hudson. "My Fair Ladies" is that type of comedy that experienced playgoers know is a dud ten minutes after the curtain is up.

There is nothing believable in its exposition. The characters are dummies speaking set and labored lines. The story is a flimsy fiction. The situations are directly out of the stock drawer.

The Gages of Mt. Kisco take in Lady Keith-Odlyn and Lady Palfrey-Stuart as two interesting evacuees, supposedly widowed by the

war and both expectant. Mr. Gage blusters helplessly. Mrs. Gage tries to make capital of her guests' visit.

Crude Exposures

The social leaders of Westchester are temporarily taken in. One or two neighborhood young men are sentimentally intrigued and willing to assume the obligations of parenthood.

Comes an exposure that is candid but crude and everybody gets a fresh start.

The cast is not too happily chosen. Ethel Morrison is best as an uppity social leader. The girls are played by Celeste Holm, who is reasonably poised, and Betty Furness, who is obviously flustered.

Russell Hardie and Alfred Etcheverry try to bring two young males to life by violently rubbing sticks of dry dialogue together. No luck.

The others are willing, but weakly supported by their authors. Watson Barratt contributes a nice looking dove-colored interior and somebody has spent a nice bundle of bills on his favorite actresses' costumes.

Reprinted from NEW YORK POST, March 24, 1941

"My Fair Ladies" Seen At the Hudson Theatre

By JOHN MASON BROWN

ALTHOUGH I am sorry to have to bring this up, a farce called "My Fair Ladies" was presented at the Hudson last night. For the sake of the record I suppose it must be noted that Arthur L. Jarrett and Marcel Klaubner were its authors. No doubt for the convenience of historians in some unlikely future it should also be set down that Mary Sargent, Herbert Yost, Celeste Holm, Betty Furness, Russell Hardie, and Ethel Morrison were among the actors asked to waste their time, and in some cases their talents, on it.

Having said so much, there is little more to say. Perhaps it should be added that the story with which the Messrs. Jarrett and Klaubner have laboriously concerned themselves is one that relates the misadventures of two American chorus girls who have been accepted as titled English ladies in Mount Kisco. The barest outline of such a plot is enough to make one order mourning. It carries with it a complete explanation of the evening's fatal defects.

It should prepare one for what is distressingly old-fashioned in the farce's writing. It

should send up warnings as to what is bound to seem silly, pointless, or downright exhumed in the point of view. Because even frequent mention of the present war and very occasional laugh-worthy lines cannot hide the fact that "My Fair Ladies" is a chestnut not only in which, but from which, the worm has turned. At least this one turned from it with great relief last night. For such relief, many thanks.

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NEW YORK JOURNAL AND AMERICAN
March 24, 1941

'Fair Ladies' Has Premiere at Hudson

LAST night's new comedy at the Hudson Theatre presented by Albert Lewis and Max Siegel brings two American showgirls as "My Fair Ladies" from the embattled environs of London Bridge to the comparative serenity of refuge at Willowbrook in Mt. Kisco.

There, at the hands of the authors, Arthur L. Jarrett and Marcel Klaubner and in the home of a trusting family who mistakes them for titled British refugees, the fair ladies become involved in a situation which shatters domestic tranquillity and promotes general chaos in Westchester society.

It all happened because a show closed in London and Florabelle Buckley and Viola McGinnes, two stranded chorines wanted to return to America. A susceptible young man in the Foreign Office was the first step; passports on the Clipper faked in the names of Lady Keith-Odlyn and Lady Palfrey-Stuart, the next and the play opens with the third.

Overwhelmed as English nobility at LaGuardia Field, Florabelle and Viola are ensconced at the fireside of the Gages at Mt. Kisco with all Westchester at their feet and Mrs. Gage almost hysterically atop the social ladder she has been endeavoring to scale for ten years.

Before two days have elapsed Florabelle and Viola have addressed Rotarians, agreed to appear at charity balls, luncheons and teas, hoodwinked a craggy dowager-dictator of Mt. Kisco society and ensnared the affections of two young men.

Relying on their prestige their hosts have promoted a Florida real estate scheme to replenish the dwindled family exchequer.

Before two days have completely elapsed the masquerade is over. Florabelle and Viola are exposed by a perpetually inebriate Broadway playboy whose angelic sponsorship of stage vehicles for their legitimate career makes them, at least, identifiably dear to him.

On the third day the fair ladies resolve the complications engendered by this disaster, the craggy dowager endorses the real estate scheme, the family fortunes of the Gages are assured financially and matrimonially and Florabelle and Viola scamper off with their heroes leaving their nobility behind them.

The production was directed by Albert Lewis, the setting was by Watson Barratt and the cast included Mary Sargent, Russell Hardie, Betty Furness, Celeste Holm, Ethel Morrison, Otto Hulett and Vincent Donohue.

—J. D.

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CRITICS'
THEATRE REVIEWS

"My Fair Ladies"

Reprinted from NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, March 24, 1941

My Fair Ladies Enters Dramatic Piffle Contest

By SIDNEY B. WHIPPLE

UNTIL last night the leading contender for the title of the season's most horrible example of dramatic piffle was a little number called Popsy, chiefly remembered for the unhappy vision of Al Shean in a pair of long drawers. There were those who hotly contested the right of another giddy play called Brooklyn Biarritz to the dubious honor, but they were outvoted on the grounds that Brooklyn Biarritz at least had a good setting with real sand and banana peels.

The arrival of *My Fair Ladies*, described as a comedy by Arthur L. Jarrett and Marcel Klauber, throws the contest wide open again, and my loyalty to Popsy, after 41 days of stout argument against all comers from Boudoir to Quiet Please, is beginning to waver.

Mr. Jarrett and Mr. Klauber, harping on the ancient theme of mistaken identity, relate the adventures of two chorus girls who masquerade as a pair of titled English refugees. Kind hearts meaning more than coronets, they succeed, in the course of three tedious acts, in putting to shame the snobbish dowager who wants to put them in jail for their deception and in marrying the wealthy young men of their choice.

Somewhere in the third act the authors made a patient explanation of the reason their girls were traveling on passports originally issued to Lady Keith-Odlyn and Lady Palfrey-Stuart instead of their own documents, but by that time, what with drunken playboys

breaking into the script and all sorts of elopements, deals about land in Florida, off-stage pinochle games, hysterical hostesses and insolent adolescents entering into the proceedings, the only explanation I wanted to hear was why Albert Lewis and Max Siegel produced it.

The delicate beauty of Watson Barratt's setting was completely lost in the hurlyburly of the play.

Betty Furness, another refugee from Hollywood, and Celeste Holm (the beautiful Mary L. in *The Time of Your Life*) played the roles of the two masqueraders. Miss Furness showed poise in the most distressing circumstances and Miss Holm performed nobly against the odds.

Reprinted from
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
March 24, 1941

Born on Sunday . . . Beaned on Monday

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

LAST night's comedy concerns two American chorus girls masquerading as English ladies of title. It is also, I fear, the work of two American gentlemen masquerading as playwrights. It is a sensationally dreary effort, for which those four famous freezing words of Queen Victoria—"we are not amused"—are as good a criticism as any. I laughed not, neither did I smile.

The chorines, it seems, were stranded in wartime London and thought their best chance of getting passage on the clipper was to assume fancy title. Back in America, they were grabbed off as distinguished refugees by a social-climbing matron of Mt. Kisco. Thereafter they had Mt. Kisco society in a dither and New York first-nighters in a daze.

In the end, I might add, it turned out that the girls were really helping England win the war, because the real Lady Keith-Odlyn and the real Lady Palfrey-Stuart were doing dangerous espionage work somewhere on the Continent, and this way Hitler would think they were in Mt. Kisco, and eventually be caught off guard or something.

Consider the plot a clue to the dialogue—we'll just skip the stagecraft—and you'll have a fair idea of what *My Fair Ladies* is like.

The cast did what they could.

Critics' THEATRE REVIEWS

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